



THE BLACK CATS

AND THE

TINKER'S WIFE

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MARY & MARGARET BAKER





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AND THE TINKER'S WIFE



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THE BLACK CATS AND THE TINKER'S WIFE

Once upon a time there was a tinker; he tramped about the country with his bundle of tools slung over his shoulder, and his little wife tramped beside him.

Would you like to know what was in the bundle she carried? Why a silk handkerchief of golden yellow to tie over her hair on holiday and fair-days, and a ball of yarn with which she was always knitting, and a loaf of bread, and all the money they had—and that was never more than a few silver pieces.









Although the two bundles held all they possessed the tinker and his wife were as happy as could be, and as they trudged along from one farm-house to another; and one village to the next, he would whistle as merrily as a black-bird, and she would sing and laugh, and dance along the short-cropped grass by the roadside, poising on her pretty bare feet as lightly as a fairy.

When at sound of his call some good-wife came out with a broken kettle, or a leaking pan he would sit down on the door-step to mend it;









And while he worked his wife told tales of elves and dwarfs and water-sprites to the children who gathered round.

Then when night came they would take their supper of bread and a little bowl of milk, and lie down to sleep wherever they could find shelter, sometimes out-of-doors, sometimes in a cottage or barn.







You would think there was no pleasanter way of living, yet sometimes when they passed through a village and saw through open door-ways into the cosy sunny little rooms where the women were busied about their work the tinker's wife would sigh and turn to look back many, many times. And at that the tinker would sigh too and think sadly of how little he could earn—so little that perhaps he would never be able to give her a home at all.











Now one day it happened that there was a great storm, and towards evening it grew wilder and wilder; the wind came whirling and sweeping along, driving the rain and the hail before it in blinding sheets. The country was bleak and bare, not so much as a hedge or wall behind which to take shelter, and presently it grew so dark that one could not see an arm's length ahead.

The tinker wrapped his wife in his tattered cloak and they struggled on and on, but it was weary work fighting the storm.

Then suddenly they saw a light before them.







“It comes from some cottage,” said the tinker. “We will knock and ask shelter.” But when they came near they found it was not a cottage, but a cave.

There was a bright fire burning within: above it hung an iron pot, and nearby stood a three-legged stool and a water-pitcher.

There was nothing strange in all that, but there was something very odd about the cave all the same, for sitting round the fire were more black cats than could easily be counted—big ones and little ones, fat ones and lean ones,











old ones and young ones, long-haired
and short-haired,







—all kinds!











“Ho, there within!” cried the tinker.

Such a flurry as there was about the fire! Some of the cats ran to hide themselves, some sprang to the entrance, some with arched backs and stiffened tails stayed by the fire.

“Ho, there, friend!” cried the tinker again, and as no one answered he stepped boldly inside and his wife followed.

“Strange that there should be no one here,” said he. “And there are more cats than I care about myself; but on such a night one must be grateful for any lodging.”







So they sat down by the fire, his wife on the three-legged stool and he on the ground beside her, and they warmed and dried themselves. And presently from this corner and from that the cats came creeping back and sat down opposite staring and staring with their great green eyes.

“Puss, puss, puss,” coaxed the tinker’s wife; but the cats only twitched their ears and stared till their eyes glistened red as though they were on fire inside.

“They will be friendly enough when they see we wish them no harm,” said she; and truly before long a little black kitten came rubbing against her foot and jumped into her lap.











So the night passed away and the storm went down and it was morning. The tinker's wife packed up her little bundle ready to start again.

"I wish—" she said, and at that all the cats pricked up their ears.

"I wish I could give thee thy wish," said the tinker.

"I wish I had a little home to care for: I wish we might live in this cave."

At that the tinker laughed. "Why, if that is not surprising," said he. "It is the very wish I would wish myself. Have thy wish till someone else comes."

And she clapped her hands for joy.







So the tinker went down the hillside alone, with his bundle of tools on his back, and his wife stood waving good-bye as long as she could see him.

Then she went into the cave and swept down all the cob-webs with a bunch of heather, and chased the dust out of the corners, and went about and about till the cave was as clean and neat as could be.

And the cats sat round the fire and stared and stared as though it was the most surprising thing they had ever seen.











When it drew near evening she sat outside on the three-legged stool with her knitting in her hand ready to wave to the tinker as soon as he came in sight.

And there he was striding up the hill, and she ran to meet him and brought him into the cave, and they sat by the fire as they had done before.

“Has not anyone come yet?” asked the tinker.

“No,” she answered, “and I am glad; ’tis such a cosy little cave that I wish——”

And at that all the cats pricked up their ears.







“I wish I could give thee thy wish,” said the tinker.

“I wish we could live here always and that there was another three-legged stool then thou wouldst not need to sit on the ground.”

“Why, if that is not surprising,” quoth the tinker. “’Tis the very wish I would wish myself.” And he laughed and kissed her.

“And what news have you learnt to-day?” she asked.

“Strange news,” said the tinker. “There lies a farm yonder with fields all untilled, and when I asked what had befallen, they told me that a witch had spirited away the ploughman because his dog chased her cat. And no one has seen or heard of him since.”

At that one of the cats began a most mournful wailing, and all the others joined in.

“Alas!” said the tinker’s wife. “What a sad and sorrowful tale!”











Next day again the tinker went down the hill-side alone and his little wife kept house in the cave, and went about and about it till it was as neat and as clean as could be. And when he came back at evening there she was sitting at the entrance with all the cats around her watching for him.







“Has not anyone come yet?” he asked when they were seated by the fire.

“No,” she answered. “and I am glad. ’Tis such a pleasant cave that I wish——”

And at that all the cats pricked up their ears.

“I wish I could give thee thy wish,” said the tinker.

“I wish we could live here always and that we had a little hive of bees to gather honey from the heather-blossoms.”

“Now if that is not surprising,” quoth the tinker. “’Tis the very wish I would wish myself.” And he laughed and kissed her.











“And what is the news thou hast learnt to-day?” she asked.

“Strange news,” said the tinker. “In a home yonder there is an old rag doll and no little girl to nurse it; she made a face at the witch one day and no one has seen or heard of her since.”

And at that the tiniest kitten began a most mournful wailing and all the others joined in.

“Alas!” said the tinker’s wife. “What a sad and sorrowful tale!”







And so it happened every day. When they sat by the fire at dusk the tinker's wife had always a wish to wish—for a little goat to feed on the hill-side and give them milk, or for a little brown bowl to hold the berries she gathered; this time for a rose-tree to grow about the cave mouth, that time for a broom that she might sweep the dust away the better.

And the tinker had always a sad and sorrowful tale to tell of people who had disappeared. There was the farmer's wife who had given the witch a scorched cake of bread,











the little boy who had called names after
her,









the dairy-maid who had not curtsied to
her,







the strolling player whose music did not
please her,









the lovers who had chosen to sit too near her cave to watch the moon. And at each of these tales one of the cats would begin to wail most dismally and all the others would join in.











So things went on for a long, long time, and it would have been hard to find anyone as happy as the tinker's wife as she went about and about the cave making it so neat and clean, or as the tinker when he came striding up the hillside at the end of the day and saw her waiting to wave to him.

Now sometimes when the tinker told his strange tales his wife would begin to wonder and ponder. And "Can it be?" and "If it should be so—" said she, and then she would stop and shake her head and sigh.

One night she sat thinking longer than ever, and then—"I wonder what happened to them when they disappeared," and again—"Is it not more than a little strange that there are so many cats here, and all black?" And at last "I wish——"







“I wish I could give thee thy wish,”
said the tinker.

“I wish these cats were changed back
into what they ought to be.”

And behold! In less than the flick of
an eyelid there they stood—the little girl
who had **made** a face, the boy who had
called names, the ploughman, the lovers,
the dairy-maid and all the rest.

It would take a long, long time to tell
how they thanked the tinker and his wife,
how they laughed and cried for joy, and
how happy they all were.











“To think my wish should come true,” marvelled the tinker’s wife.

“All good wishes come true sometime,” quoth the tinker.

“There is another shall come true,” cried the farmer’s wife, “for as quickly as it can be led up the hillside my best goat shall be yours.”

“And I will bring my little brown bowl,” said the little girl.

“And I will make the finest three-legged stool that ever was seen,” said the ploughman.

And in the same way spoke all of them.

“But if this is the witch’s cave, why has she not come back?” asked the tinker. But that was a question they could not answer.

But I can tell you why: she was blown right off her broom-stick in that terrible storm.







“Suppose I had wished my wish long ago, would it have come true then?” asked the tinker’s wife.

And that was another question they could not answer—neither can I, though I know that in the end good-temper and happiness will always break evil spells.

Presently the tinker was startled to feel something come rubbing against his leg.

“Here is a cat which has not changed,” he cried.











“I cannot have wished hard enough,” said his wife; so she wished again and again and she wished this way, and she wished that way, but nothing happened.

“He must be a real cat,” she said. And so they all agreed.

“Then he shall live with us always,” said the tinker.







So the tinker and his wife and the black cat lived together in the cave and were as happy as could be all the rest of their lives. And never another wish did the tinker's wife have to wish, for all her other wishes came true and she had everything she wanted.

And that is the end of the story.







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